Chaewon Youn

Underneath

NOT A "SKINCARE GUIDE"

A genuine reflection for anyone living with skin struggles.

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Preface

What's Underneath Skin Struggles

What's underneath all skin struggles are two things: the way skin works, and the way it makes us feel. It's so important to understand and see that these two aspects lie beneath the surface of our skin. When redness and irritation dominate the surface, it feels impossible to think clearly about skin at all. It's like wearing a mask that isn't beautiful; different from makeup, but similar in the way it makes it hard to see yourself fully.

There are certain moments of deep recognition that everyone who struggles with skin issues is familiar with. The way you automatically touch your face when you're nervous, only to remember you shouldn't. The relief of dim lighting in restaurants. That feeling of shame under bright white lights indoors. The particular anxiety of someone getting too close during conversation. The ritual of checking your skin in every reflective surface you pass and constantly taking pictures of your skin. There are too many to list. I'm sure you've at least once encountered those short-form videos that spark empathy, the feeling that you're not alone.

However, these painful moments are all based on the surface. I once relentlessly scrolled through those videos too, and I thought it was helping me because I felt less lonely. But now I realize that spreading your pain isn't the best way to heal. It's so much better when you feel connected to others through positive aspects, like shared hopes, dreams, and lessons learned from these experiences. That's a much better community to be part of. It's not just about pain. We need to look underneath.

The emotional layer runs so deep. We even begin to equate our worth with our complexion, measuring good days and bad days by the state of our complexion.

Yet there is a quiet kind of freedom in realizing that you are not your skin condition. Your intelligence, kindness, creativity, and potential exist entirely apart from whether you're having a breakout or a clear-skin day. The people who truly matter in your life see beyond the surface. They know how you laugh, how you think, and the energy you bring into their world.

Still, this truth can be hard to hold onto. That's because we've been taught, again and again, to place too much value on appearances. Over time, we start to believe the surface means more than it does. But real healing begins when we shift our attention to what lies underneath.

Living with skin struggles means learning how to care for both your skin and yourself. It requires two kinds of care, practical and emotional, each rooted in what lies beneath the surface. In this book, we'll take time to explore both.

A Note About Me

My name is Chaewon (Won) Youn. I'm not a dermatologist or a celebrity with flawless skin. I'm just someone who has struggled deeply with skin. I've spent years trying treatments, avoiding mirrors, and questioning my worth because of what showed up on my face.

This book isn't about pretending I've figured it all out or offering miracle guidance. It's about sharing what I've learned in the trenches of my struggle, hoping it might help you navigate your path. At its heart, this is everything I wished I could tell my past self.

Part I Understanding and Treating Your Skin

There's a famous saying from The Art of War: "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you will not be defeated." I don't want to frame skin as your enemy, but there's wisdom in this approach. When it comes to skin struggles, healing comes from understanding both your skin and yourself.

1. Identify Your Skin Type

What many people who struggle with their skin often don't realize is that you have to take a very objective and analytical approach to it. It's easy to feel emotional or frustrated when your skin isn't behaving the way you want, but relying only on feelings can lead to overreacting, overusing products, or blaming the wrong things.

For example, you might assume a product "doesn't work" just because you broke out the next day, but if you take a step back and analyze things clearly, it could've been something else: your period starting, a change in weather, or even a new food you tried. It's not always about the last thing you applied to your skin.

That's why it helps to keep track, whether it's journaling, taking photos, or noting patterns over time.

However, it is also my controversial opinion that recording skin, by any means, could cause obsessions and stress. So it is essential to keep a balance.

In my experience, there were two perspectives to consider when analyzing my skin: first, genetics, and second, the environment, including any routine or habit. I thought those two factors would decide my skin type. I recommend using the Baumann skin type.

The Baumann system, developed by dermatologist Dr. Leslie Baumann, is one of the most detailed skin typing methods out there. Unlike the basic oily/dry/sensitive categories, it breaks skin down into 16 unique types based on four key characteristics:

1. Oily (O) or Dry (D): how much oil your skin produces
2. Sensitive (S) or Resistant (R): how reactive your skin is to products or environmental triggers
3. Pigmented (P) or Non-Pigmented (N): how prone your skin is to uneven pigmentation or dark spots
4. Tight (T) or Wrinkle-Prone (W): how your skin shows signs of aging, like sagging or fine lines

Each skin type is a combination of one from each pair, like ORSW (Oily, Resistant, Sensitive, Wrinkle-prone) or DRNT (Dry, Resistant, Non-pigmented, Tight). This makes it a lot easier to understand your skin's needs from both a treatment and prevention perspective, and helps guide more personalized product choices.

Fig. 1. "16 Baumann Skin Types." Skin Type Solutions, www.skintypesolutions.com. Accessed 6 Aug. 2025. Used with permission of MetaBeauty, Inc.

Moreover, check out our magazine's articles about the science behind our skin if you're interested in learning more, and I strongly encourage you to do so because it helps a lot to understand the science behind everything.

But one thing you have to keep in mind when determining your skin type is that it can change. Whether you start a new medication, move to a new country, go through seasonal shifts, get your period, or even experience stress, your skin type might shift accordingly with any life changes. That's why it's so important to re-evaluate your skin regularly, instead of sticking to one routine just because it "used to work."

Let me introduce the three main mistakes I've made because I couldn't logically analyze the condition of my skin.

First was over-exfoliating. This is a common topic discussed online and offline by influencers and doctors. I think the underlying cause of this problem is two things. First, most skincare products specialized for acne include exfoliates. The second is because consumers who first experience acne don't know how much exfoliation their skin can endure. To resolve this problem, even introductory acne patients should be well educated that every skin is different and can tolerate different amounts of exfoliates.

My second mistake was over-calming. This might sound controversial, but I figured not every skin type benefits from calming skincare products. Many calming products contain menthol-related ingredients that can reduce the skin's surface temperature. Still, they also often produce a cooling or tingling sensation that can lead to irritation or even chemical burns for some people. Calming skincare is generally suitable for temporarily inflamed or heat-sensitive skin, but it's not ideal for damaged, sensitive, or barrier-impaired skin, where that "refreshing" feeling may worsen the condition.

My third mistake was ignoring the ingredients. Sometimes I didn't check the ingredient list at all. Other times, I noticed something questionable, like alcohol, fragrance, or known irritants, but still used the product anyway, hoping it would work. That kind of neglect always came back to hurt my skin. Skincare isn't just about branding or claims on the label; it's about what goes into your skin. I learned the hard way that even one or two problematic ingredients can undo the benefits of the rest.

2. Identify Your Triggers

What many people who struggle with their skin often also don't realize is that they are analyzing what triggers their breakouts. I also spent a long time making a list of possible triggers. It is hard to analyze your breakouts, and it may take a year or two to establish a routine. However, with the list of full possibilities I will provide in this chapter, you will have some more options to think about, especially something you might have missed.

2-1. Medicine

Let me be clear: I'm not a doctor, and this is not medical advice. I'm only sharing what I've personally experienced or learned through research and conversations with dermatologists.

Over the years, I've been prescribed several medications for my skin. One of them is isotretinoin (commonly known by the brand name Accutane), which I'm still taking. It helped reduce my deep, cystic breakouts, but it also came with side effects I wasn't fully prepared for, such as extreme dryness, peeling lips, sun sensitivity, and mood swings. The process required close monitoring and a lot of care.

But isotretinoin is just one example. Here are other medications that may affect your skin, for better or worse:

- Antibiotics (like doxycycline, minocycline): Often used for inflammatory acne. They can be helpful, but may disrupt your gut microbiome or cause sun sensitivity.
- Hormonal treatments (like birth control pills or spironolactone): These can stabilize hormone levels and improve acne for some, especially if your breakouts are tied to your menstrual cycle. But they can also cause flare-ups or other body-wide effects, especially at the beginning.
- Steroids (oral or topical): While short-term use of corticosteroids can reduce inflammation, overuse (especially of topical steroids) can cause something called steroid-induced acne or even skin thinning.
- Mood stabilizers or antipsychotic medications: Some of these can affect hormones or increase oil production, triggering breakouts in some individuals.
- Supplements: Even non-prescription substances like vitamin B, biotin or protein powders (especially whey) have been linked to acne in certain people.

Medications can be powerful tools, but they can also be unpredictable. What clears one person's skin might worsen another's. That's why it's so important to track what you're taking, how your skin responds, and how long those changes last. If you ever suspect that a medicine is contributing to your breakouts, bring it up with a medical professional.

2-2. Laser treatments

Laser treatments might sound high-tech and scientifically promising; sometimes, they are. But they're not a one-size-fits-all solution. I've personally tried laser treatments for both acne and scarring, and while I saw some short and long-term results, I also learned that lasers can be tricky depending on your skin type, timing, doctor, and overall skin condition.

I will talk more about lasers in a different chapter, but please do acknowledge that laser treatments can also be one of the triggering factors.

2-3. Stress

Controlling stress is probably the most valuable lesson I learned during my skin journey. It is like... training in the forest. No matter what unexpected wind blows, you have to be disciplined to stay calm like a bamboo stick.

Here are some of the most common examples of stress triggers and some tips:

a. School or work related
    i. Overworking: Having work due day after day, night after night, can exhaust anyone very easily. Becoming addicted to working makes one care less about themselves and place more value on their work. Since self-care is crucial when it comes to caring for skin, overworking can cause significant stress when it becomes a burden to do self-care in any form. It is hard to give out tips for stress caused by working because most of the time, it is unavoidable. However, when I was going through the college admissions process, I think the best I could do was NOT stressing about the cons of overworking, but focus on the pros of it, and enjoy it if possible. I don't want to say "just relax and rest", because that is just not an option for so many days in life. I just want to say that time will pass by; as good memories pass by, so do the hardships.
    ii. Slump: Losing motivation or feeling like nothing is moving forward can be emotionally draining. It can lead to unhealthy habits like skipping showers, eating irregularly, or neglecting personal hygiene.

i. (continued) Constantly worrying about your skin can be exhausting, and sometimes, giving your mind a break is just as crucial as the skincare itself.
ii. Scarring: Even after breakouts, there's often no time to relax because now comes the "after care." To prevent scarring, we start searching for every possible method to minimize marks. Treating scars can be especially stressful because it's a long-term process, and often an expensive one. Whether it's topical creams, laser treatments, or injections, scar care tends to be costly, and results don't usually show right away. My advice for stress caused by scarring is this: try not to obsess over it. Instead, focus on the progress you've already made. You've gotten through a breakout, which is an achievement in itself. Scars can be long-lasting, but many fade gradually with time. And practically speaking, they're often easy to cover with just a bit of spot concealer if you want to.
iii. Irritating: One thing that often gets overlooked when talking about stress caused by skin conditions is the physical discomfort, especially irritation and itchiness from things like mild eczema. Trying not to scratch can be incredibly stressful, and sometimes even painful. It's not just a physical urge, but a mental battle. My tip for dealing with this kind of stress is to create a moment of calm. Try listening to gentle, calming music. Loosen any tension in your muscles and allow your skin to rest. When your body is relaxed, it becomes slightly easier to resist the urge to scratch. Small habits like this won't heal the condition on their own, but they can help protect your skin and ease your mind while you're healing.

ii. As I mentioned before, self-care is a fundamental part of taking care of your skin, or really, any kind of healing. My advice for getting through a slump is to try talking to someone. It doesn't have to be your closest friend or a family member. Even a simple conversation with someone can give you a fresh perspective, a bit of motivation, or just a sense of release. Sometimes, that feeling of emotional relief is all you need to take the next small step.

b. Skin related

i. Breaking out: Sudden flare-ups can feel like a significant setback, especially when you've been trying so hard by avoiding takeout, cutting back on drinks, or skipping workouts to protect your skin. When I was going through my skin journey, the most discouraging moments were when I kept breaking out no matter what I did. Sometimes, it drained me so much that I wanted to give up, thinking that nothing would ever heal my skin. For this kind of stress, I want to share a piece of advice that might seem a bit controversial. Sometimes, it helps to stop thinking about it all the time. I know that healing your skin often feels like a constant job, where you analyze every symptom and reaction. But I recommend setting a routine or timeline for when you'll check in on your skin. For example, you can choose to check in three times a day: once in the morning, once after lunch, and once after your shower. During those times, take a photo, note any changes, and write down how your skin feels. Outside of those check-ins, try to shift your focus to something else. Let yourself enjoy other parts of your life.

c. Personal (skin related)

i. Self-esteem (comparing): Social media makes it easy to feel "less than." If you're easily affected, remember two things: filters aren't reality, and social media can be toxic. My simple but powerful tip? Turn off your phone. Even a short break can help you clear your mind and see yourself more kindly.

d. Social

i. Fighting with/ family or friends: Arguments or distance with a close companion can create emotional stress that shows up on your skin. The feeling of being misunderstood or left out is heavier than it seems, and even affects your self-care and skin condition. My tip is, you don't need to fix everything right away. Give it time, and focus on yourself while doing that.

2-4. Sleeping schedule

From my experience, it's not just a lack of sleep that affects your skin. Rapidly changing your sleep schedule in an unstable way can be just as harmful. Your body needs rhythm to recover and heal properly. That's why having a consistent routine is so important. A small tip to avoid this trigger is to stick to regular mealtimes and avoid taking naps during the day. These simple habits can help your body settle into a more stable sleep pattern.

2-5. Food & Water

There are two main things I want to share about these triggers. First is having a routine of similar and dull meals. The second is about becoming allergic, celiac, dairy allergic, or even vegan.

From my experience, eating at regular times and having simple, consistent meals helps reduce the variables that could contribute to skin sensitivity. I felt that when your body knows what to expect, it digests and reacts more calmly. Dull or repetitive meals may sound boring, but they often give your skin the break it needs, especially compared to spicy, irritating, or greasy foods.

Sometimes, skin conditions can lead to major dietary shifts, like suddenly going vegan, quitting dairy, or discovering a food allergy or sensitivity, such as celiac disease. These changes can be complex to make and even more challenging to adjust to, both mentally and physically. It's stressful not knowing what's safe to eat, and the fear of breakouts only adds to that pressure. If you're experimenting with your diet, try to track your skin's reaction over time, not just day by day. Some allergic reactions show up immediately, while others build up slowly and only appear after your body reaches its limit. Don't make too many changes at once. Try adjusting one thing at a time. Giving your body time to adapt is just as important as the change itself.

Also, avoiding blood sugar spikes is a good habit. Sudden sugar surges can trigger hormonal imbalance or inflammation, both of which can worsen skin conditions. Try to build balanced meals with enough protein, fiber, and healthy fats to keep your blood sugar level balanced throughout the day.

2-6. Hormone

If hormone and menstrual cycles are what trigger breakouts, mostly acne, it is something challenging to control. I felt the best thing to do was to focus on my body first. Trying to comfort and calm my own body generally led to calming skin. When it feels too out of control, try hormone-supportive teas or talk to your doctor about medical options.

2-7. Hygiene & Habits

Touching your face, not changing pillow case, not changing bed sheets, not cleaning the bathroom, using over-dated products, not cleaning make-up tools, not cleaning your room, not washing your hands regularly, not washing your hair, using bad quality water, not using water filters, not cleaning glasses, ... The list is endless. It is overwhelming at first to abide by all these rules and keep all your things and spaces clean. I sometimes wonder if all these habits are necessary for clear skin. However, don't! Try doing one thing at a time. For example, make a plan of your routine; wipe down your desk every night, clean the bathroom every day, and clean your room every Saturday. Try water filters for both the shower and the bathroom sink next month, to avoid overwhelm. Try changing your pillow sheets every night sometime later. Don't push yourself too hard, but also don't let yourself go too loose. '

Hygiene is important. Hygiene is NOT fragrance! It's cleaning the parts you can't see with your eyes.

I consider washing your face daily to be a fundamental part of skincare. However, that doesn't mean everyone needs to scrub their face and body with soap every morning and night. I track how my skin feels throughout the day. When it gets oily, I wash my face with a gentle, low-pH gel cleanser both in the morning and at night. But during times when my skin was dehydrated, I sometimes washed with only water, or used just a tiny amount of a mild cleanser. The key is this: never copy someone else's skincare routine just because it worked for them on social media. Everyone's skin is different. The best approach is to observe your skin carefully and slowly adopt what it truly needs, one step at a time. Clean skin doesn't come from scrubbing hard or making it squeaky. Over-washing or being too aggressive can damage your skin barrier. The goal is not to make your skin feel tight or stripped, but to keep it balanced and calm.

3. Simplify Your Routine

"Less is more"; you've probably heard this before. But hear me out, because in skincare, less is truly so much more. The more products we use, the more variables we introduce to our skin, which makes it harder to know what's working and what's making things worse. Especially when your skin is sensitive or going through a tough time, simplicity isn't just a preference, it's a survival strategy.

From my experience, most people go through four stages when they first start taking skincare seriously, regardless of what led them there.

The first is the searching phase. This is when you're desperate for answers. You start researching everything, Googling late at night, scrolling through skincare TikTok, watching hours of product reviews, and listening to people's "holy grail" routines. You feel hopeful, like the solution must be out there, and you just need to buy it.

Then, there's the confusion phase. Your skin isn't improving, or maybe it's reacting even worse than before. You start asking yourself, "Is it this serum?" "Did I over-exfoliate?" "Maybe the sunscreen is breaking me out?" It becomes hard to tell what's helping and what's harming, and this uncertainty causes even more stress. You begin to doubt everything.

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Finally, there's the crash phase. At this point, people usually take one of two paths. Some continue clinging to all their products out of fear that removing even one will make things worse.

Others throw everything out, are completely overwhelmed, and go back to their old routine, or sometimes stop doing anything at all, and give up. Both reactions come from the same place: burnout.

If you have access, the best thing you can do is consult a dermatologist or doctor who knows your skin condition. But if that's not possible, here's what I did: I used websites and apps that analyze the ingredients in skincare products. These platforms break down each ingredient, showing whether it's comedogenic (pore-clogging), irritating, or soothing, and even explain what skin types it's best for. This helped me avoid ingredients that had previously caused flare-ups and gave me more confidence in what I was putting on my face. These platforms break down each ingredient, showing whether it's comedogenic (pore-clogging), irritating, or soothing, and even explain what skin types it's best for. This helped me avoid ingredients that had previously caused flare-ups and gave me more confidence in what I was putting on my face. It also gave me a sense of transparency and trust in the brands I chose. I found it helpful to stick with one brand once I found one that worked for me. Exploring the variety of products within that same brand made it easier to build a routine that felt consistent, stable, and safe for my skin.

4. Explore Your Options

I have gone through so many medications, treatments, doctors, skincare products, and more. Now I want to share my experience of each option I went through. The following options are not in the order in which I received them.

First, I want to talk about the medications I've used. The one I still take is isotretinoin, commonly known as Accutane. Let's start with the benefits. Acne doesn't disappear overnight with this medication, but I did notice a slow and steady decrease in the severity of breakouts. One of the most noticeable effects was a significant reduction in oil production. However, the oily areas of my face. especially the T-zone, still produced some oil, particularly around the nose. In contrast, places like under the eyes, cheeks, and sides of the face felt much drier, with almost no oiliness at all.

Another interesting change I noticed was the speed of skin turnover. I'm not sure if this is a benefit or a side effect, but my dead skin cells started shedding much faster. Even without using exfoliating products, I experienced regular, visible exfoliation. Surprisingly, this also seemed to help certain post-acne marks fade faster, which was a pleasant discovery. At the same time, the downside was that I sometimes had noticeable patches of flaking skin, which could feel uncomfortable or look uneven.

As for scars and pigmentation, my results were mixed. In some cases, hyperpigmentation faded more quickly than expected, possibly due to the faster cell turnover. But on the other hand, I also experienced slower wound healing at times. Minor cuts or pimples sometimes took longer to recover from fully.

Now, more about the side effects. One of the most commonly known side effects of Accutane is excessive dryness.

Especially on the lips, face, and sometimes even inside the nose or eyes, Accutane can cause noticeable dryness. Thankfully, I didn't experience this symptom too severely. The dryness was there, but it was manageable with basic moisturizers and lip balm. I've heard of cases where the skin becomes painfully tight or cracked, but for me, it stayed within a tolerable range. The only dryness I experienced was on my lips and eyes. For my lips, I used Vaseline regularly, and for my eyes, I relied on moisturizing eye drops. These simple steps were enough to keep the dryness under control.

Other medications I took included a variety of antifungal medicines and antibiotics. For these types of medication, I strongly recommend consulting a doctor before starting. It is tough to judge on your own which antibiotic is right for your skin, what dosage you need, and how long you should take it. The effects, side effects, and even the time it takes to see improvement can vary greatly depending on the individual and the specific bacteria involved. In my case, some antibiotics helped calm inflammation quickly, while others seemed to have little effect. This is why professional guidance and regular check-ups are essential. You want to make sure you're using them safely and effectively, without building resistance or harming your overall health.

Some supplements I was recommended included vitamin B5 (pantothenic acid) and omega-3 fish oil. As with any supplement, it's essential to check with a healthcare professional before starting, mainly to ensure the dosage is correct for you. Pantothenic acid is sometimes suggested for supporting skin barrier health and helping regulate oil production, while omega-3s may help reduce inflammation and support overall skin hydration. In my case, vitamin B5 ended up making my skin drier, and omega-3 fish oil made my skin oilier. For me, neither was a good option for maintaining balanced skin health.

Now, I want to share my experience with the laser treatments I received in Korea. Once again, this is not medical advice, just my journey and how my skin responded. Over time, I tried a variety of different lasers, each with its purpose and results. The ones I experienced were Potenza, Agnes, NeoBeam, V-Beam, LDM, and Cryo.

First, Potenza. I only did this treatment once, and I don't exactly remember the specific mode or tool my doctor used. What I do remember is that the goal was to help fill in my deep acne scars. At first, I thought it hadn't worked at all. I was worried it might cause new breakouts. But over time, I noticed my skin gradually improving—the indentations slowly filling in. I used to have dozens of severely pitted scars on my face, but now, unless you look very closely, my skin looks almost smooth. The recovery was slow, but for me, it was worth it.

Next is Agnes. Agnes is a laser that targets individual, large, inflamed pimples directly. In my experience, it was pretty effective at quickly calming and shrinking significant inflammatory acne that couldn't be treated by simply extracting it. However, when it came to one of the laser's primary purposes, preventing future recurrence, I didn't notice a significant difference. Still, for stubborn, painful pimples that couldn't be resolved by other means, Agnes was a convenient option.

Next is NeoBeam. This laser is generally used to reduce overall oil production and calm inflammation. In my experience, the treatment itself was mild—there was little to no pain, and the recovery time was minimal. While the results were not dramatic, I did notice my skin producing slightly less oil, especially in areas that were usually very shiny by midday. It also seemed to help keep small breakouts under control and made my skin look calmer overall

I wouldn't call NeoBeam a one-time "miracle" treatment, but as part of a regular maintenance plan, it felt like a gentle yet effective way to manage oiliness without harsh side effects. For me, it worked best when combined with other treatments rather than on its own.

Next is V-Beam. This laser is designed to target and reduce redness, which was one of the most severe issues on my face at the time. My redness wasn't just a light flush; it was deep, persistent, and often made my skin look inflamed even when I wasn't breaking out. In some areas, I could even see small, visible blood vessels under the skin, which made the redness look more pronounced. V-Beam works by targeting the tiny blood vessels beneath the skin's surface, helping them shrink and fade. During the treatment, I felt only mild warmth and a light snapping sensation, and the recovery time was quick. Over a series of sessions, I noticed a significant reduction in both the overall redness and the visibility of those small vessels. While V-Beam didn't prevent new breakouts, it made my skin tone look much calmer and more even. For me, it was most valuable as a post-acne treatment, helping reduce lingering inflammation and allowing scars and marks to heal without being overshadowed by constant redness.

I also tried Gold PDT (Photodynamic Therapy). This treatment works by applying a gold nanoparticle solution to the skin, allowing it to penetrate the pores. Once the solution is absorbed, a specific type of light is used to activate it, targeting the sebaceous (oil) glands and reducing oil production over time. It's often recommended for people with oily, acne-prone skin.

In my case, I did notice that Gold PDT helped control oil to some extent, especially in areas that usually became shiny quickly. My T-zone felt less greasy for a while after each session. However, one thing I didn't like was that every time I got this treatment, the process involved exfoliating my skin beforehand. I felt that this frequent exfoliation weakened my skin barrier, making it more sensitive and sometimes even drier in certain spots. Overall, I think Gold PDT can help control oil. Still, in my experience, the preparation steps, especially the repeated exfoliation, were too harsh for my skin to do regularly.

Lastly, I also tried treatments like LDM and Cryo. LDM is a type of ultrasound treatment often used to improve skin texture, hydration, and healing. However, in my case, it didn't work well; I noticed that my skin became more congested and broke out afterward. This might not happen to everyone, but for me, it was a reminder that even gentle treatments can react differently depending on your skin's condition at the time.

Cryo, on the other hand, was something I enjoyed. It uses a cooling device to calm the skin, and I found it especially soothing when my face was red and inflamed, or right after a laser session. The cold helped reduce swelling and redness almost instantly, making my skin feel refreshed and less irritated. While Cryo isn't a treatment that changes your skin long-term, it was a great relief option during recovery periods.

Next, similar to laser treatments, are injections. In my case, I tried two main types: one for directly treating inflamed acne and another for helping acne scars recover and fill in over time.

The first is acne inflammation injections, often corticosteroid-based. These are designed to target individual inflamed pimples, delivering the medication directly into the affected area to reduce swelling and speed up healing. The most significant benefit is that they work fast—sometimes the redness and swelling shrink noticeably within 24 hours. They are also sometimes used for keloid scars, helping to soften and flatten them. However, this treatment does come with essential cautions. If the injection is placed incorrectly or at the wrong depth, it can leave a deep, pitted scar in its place. This risk is rare when done by an experienced doctor, but it's still something to be aware of. Another downside is the pain; for significant, swollen acne, the injection can be intensely sharp and uncomfortable, even if it only lasts a few seconds.

The second type is scar recovery injections, such as Rejuran. These are made to stimulate collagen production and support the skin's repair process. When I first started these injections, I honestly couldn't see much difference. My skin still looked uneven, and the deep scars were still there. But over the following weeks and months, I began to notice subtle improvements—tiny indentations were slowly filling in, and the overall texture of my skin became smoother. The change was gradual, so much so that I didn't realize how much progress had been made until I compared old photos. Now, some areas that once had noticeable pitted scars look almost completely normal unless you look very closely in intense lighting.

For me, injections were an essential complement to other treatments. The acne inflammation injections were like emergency tools for calming sudden, severe breakouts, while the scar recovery injections worked quietly in the background, helping my skin rebuild over time. They weren't the most comfortable treatments. Both come with some pain and swelling, but the targeted approach made them worth it for specific situations.

The last option I hope people struggling with skin issues consider is hair care products. When you think about it, everything you put on your hair, even the wind from a hair dryer, can come into contact with your skin and irritate it. Hair touches your face, neck, and back, and the products you use can easily transfer to those areas.

When I first visited a large hospital dermatology clinic, one of the first things the doctor recommended was a shampoo change. It made me realize how much hair products can affect not just the scalp, but also the skin around it. I started looking for shampoos that were gentle yet cleansing enough, and most importantly, suitable for my scalp type. For me, this meant avoiding overly fragranced formulas or harsh ingredients that could leave residue on my skin.

I also adjusted my conditioner use. Whenever possible, I either skipped conditioner entirely or made sure it stayed far away from my skin. This helped prevent any leftover product from running down my face or back during rinsing. Another small but surprisingly effective change was thinning out my hair, getting it cut so it dried faster. This meant I didn't have to keep the hair dryer on my skin for long, which reduced heat and airflow irritation.

It might seem like a small detail, but for me, changing my hair care routine made a real difference. Sometimes the triggers for skin irritation are not only in our skincare products, but also in our hair products.

5. Be Flexible & Stay Open-Minded

One of the biggest lessons my skin journey has taught me is that there is no fixed, universal answer, and even my own "answers" don't last forever. Our skin is alive. It reacts to everything: the weather outside, the food we eat, our hormones, the amount of sleep we get, our stress levels, and even small details like the water quality in a new city. What worked perfectly for me last winter might make my skin feel heavy and irritated this summer. Something I swore I'd never try, because I didn't believe in it, or because it didn't work in the past, might suddenly become the missing piece in my routine.

In the beginning, I believed that once I found the "right" product or treatment, my skin would finally stabilize, and I could stop searching. I now know that this isn't how skin works. It's constantly shifting, and it needs me to change with it. Being flexible doesn't mean abandoning consistency; it means being consistent with the habit of listening to my skin, noticing changes, and adjusting my approach when my skin is asking for something different. This also requires quick and agile responses. Sometimes, if you see a sudden change, like unexpected dryness, an allergic reaction, or a breakout surge, waiting too long to respond can make things worse. Acting quickly and appropriately can prevent minor issues from turning into bigger ones.

If I had stayed rigid, I would have missed out on some of my most helpful discoveries. And if I had chased every new idea without patience, I would have never given my skin enough time to truly benefit from what worked. Flexibility is about finding that middle ground: open enough to explore, grounded enough to know when to stop, and agile enough to respond to your skin's needs before they escalate.

Example Scenario 1:

You've just popped a pimple, but instead of healing in a few days, the wound and resulting scar linger for weeks without improvement. This is where flexibility and a quick, agile response become essential. If you keep following your usual routine, hoping it will get better on its own, you might miss the chance to prevent long-term scarring. In this situation, I would consider switching to a gentler routine focused on barrier repair, adding targeted scar-care products, or even visiting a dermatologist for early treatment like a steroid shot or laser to speed healing. Acting quickly not only prevents the scar from deepening but can also reduce post-inflammatory pigmentation later.

Example Scenario 2:

You suddenly go on a trip, and the weather is much hotter and more humid than you're used to. Within a couple of days, your skin may experience flares, breakouts, excess oil, irritation, or even heat rash. If you stick to your exact home routine, it might overwhelm your skin in this new climate. This is when flexibility and a quick, agile response matter again. You might need to swap heavy creams for lighter gels, cleanse more often to remove sweat and sunscreen, or simplify your routine to only the essentials until your skin adjusts. The faster you adapt your skincare to match the environment, the quicker your skin will calm down. But what I mean by adjusting quickly is not just about skincare—it's also about the mental aspect. Skin changes in a new environment can be frustrating, and it's easy to spiral into stress or self-blame. That stress can make breakouts and irritation worse. Instead, remind yourself that your skin is simply reacting to a new setting, and this is temporary. Approaching the situation with calm acceptance helps you make better decisions, rather than reacting out of panic.

Example Scenario 3:

You suddenly get invited to a sleepover and end up staying the night at a friend's house without planning. You don't have your usual skincare products with you, and maybe you didn't even bring a cleanser. In this situation, flexibility and quick thinking are key. You might have to make do with whatever is available; using a gentle hand soap instead of your usual face wash, skipping specific steps, or even just rinsing with water if nothing else is safe for your skin.

What matters most is preventing significant irritation while away from your routine. If your friend has products, check the ingredient list quickly (or search them online) to make sure they don't contain anything that usually triggers your skin. When you get home, return to your routine right away to help your skin recover from any minor disruptions.

On the mental side, it's important not to let the lack of your usual products ruin your night. I believe skin can handle minor disruptions; it's long-term habits that matter most. Enjoy the moment, take basic precautions, and know that one night away from your whole routine will not undo all your progress.

Part II Taking Care of Your Heart and Mind

1. The Emotional Side of Skin

In my opinion, Part II of this book is far more critical than Part I. However, I chose to write Part I first because you need to understand it to grasp Part II fully. The title of this book, Underneath, also comes from Part II—it reflects the deeper layers beyond the surface of the skin.

Through everything I've experienced with my skin, I've come to believe that skin reflects the heart and mind more clearly than almost any other part of the body. Unlike illnesses such as the common cold, skin conditions are often visible to everyone around you. They reveal things you might wish to hide, including stress, embarrassment, anxiety, or self-consciousness. I realized this when I went through a period where my face flushed extremely easily. The moment even the slightest "breeze" of emotion passed through me, whether it was nervousness, embarrassment, or surprise, my face would suddenly turn bright red. That was when I understood: skin doesn't just respond to physical triggers. It responds to feelings.

This connection between the mind and skin is why I believe we can't talk about skincare only in terms of products, treatments, or routines. What happens underneath, your emotions, your stress levels, your self-perception, can show up on your skin just as clearly as any external factor. Learning to care for your skin means learning to care for both the physical and emotional layers at the same time.

What's underneath is not just emotions that should be controlled or hidden. It's also about discovering the hopes, lights, and strengths that live beneath the surface. It's learning to explore yourself, not only the feelings you want to reduce, like anxiety or stress, but also the ones you want to nurture, like joy, curiosity, and pride.

For me, it feels less like looking into a mirror and more like standing at the bottom of a deep hole, searching for the light above. Some days, that light feels close, you can almost reach it with just a slight change in mindset or routine. Other days, it feels far away, and you have to follow slowly, holding onto whatever hope you can find. But the climb itself teaches you things: when to rest, when to push, and how to keep moving even when you can't yet see the whole sky.

This journey isn't about perfect emotional control; it's about learning that even in the darkest moments, there's a direction toward light. The more you pay attention to what's happening underneath, the easier it becomes to find those footholds and pull yourself upward, step by step, toward both healthier skin and a healthier mind.

2. Don’t Blame Yourself, but do What You Can

During my skin journey, I learned how easy it is to fall into self-hatred and constant self-blame. There are so many "rules" we're told to follow: don't touch your face, avoid certain foods, sleep early, drink enough water, manage stress, and track your cycle. And as humans, it's impossible to follow all of them perfectly every single day. When my skin flared up, I used to replay everything I'd done wrong: that one late night, the dessert I shouldn't have eaten, the workout I skipped. It became a cycle of guilt that didn't help my skin heal.

As I mentioned in the first chapter about analyzing your skin, one of the most essential skills in a skin journey is learning to stay objective. Instead of thinking, This is all my fault, it's better to think, What can I realistically do from here? That shift in perspective changes everything. Self-blame traps you in the past, but objectivity allows you to take action in the present.

Not blaming yourself doesn't mean doing nothing. It means focusing your energy on what you can control, even if it's small. Maybe you can't undo last night's lack of sleep, but you can drink more water today. Perhaps you can't erase a breakout instantly, but you can treat it gently and prevent it from worsening. By doing what you can, you build momentum towards a positive direction, instead of losing time and energy in guilt.

Stay as objective as possible.

3. My Story

My skin issues started long before I ever had acne. As a child, I constantly dealt with erythema multiforme, mostly on my buttocks and in areas of my body where sweat would build up under clothing. During those flare-ups, the skin would become red, irritated, and uncomfortable. At that time, the standard treatment I received was topical antibiotic ointment, which I applied frequently. This helped temporarily, but the cycle would repeat whenever conditions triggered it again. It was something I lived with quietly, thinking of it as a minor inconvenience rather than a significant condition.

Things began to change in a very different direction around the end of elementary school, in grade six, and continuing into my first year of middle school. This was when I developed what most people recognize as "typical" acne, but mine was more severe than just a few small clogged pores. I had many larger, inflamed pimples, especially across my forehead. Occasionally, a single pimple would appear on my nose, but my forehead was always the main problem area. My skin was also extremely oily, particularly in my T-zone. At the time, I didn't have a structured skincare plan; I simply tried whatever I heard was "good for acne," without understanding what my skin needed.

Looking back now, I can see that most of what I was doing revolved around exfoliation. I used scrubs, peeling pads, and "deep cleansing" products far too often, believing that the more I removed, the cleaner and clearer my skin would be. Over time, this led to over-exfoliation, weakening my skin barrier.

My skin became more sensitive, inflammation worsened, and breakouts became more frequent and more aggressive.

The real turning point came during the summer break of my third year in middle school. My skin didn't just get worse. It became unrecognizable. It went beyond acne into something far more severe. My entire face looked as though it belonged in a petri dish experiment, as if bacteria were spreading rapidly across it. The redness was intense and inflamed, and the same condition spread to my upper body as well. My skin felt like it had been burned, hypersensitive to even the slightest touch. On top of that raw redness, clusters of yellow pus formed, and black scabs began to appear in multiple areas. To be honest, it didn't look comforting even to me.

In desperation, I visited every large hospital dermatology department I could find. I didn't limit myself to one clinic; I went anywhere I thought there might be help. I was prescribed antifungal medications, topical steroids, and even underwent a skin biopsy to determine the exact cause. None of these approaches worked. My skin remained in a state of severe inflammation, and nothing seemed to change its course.

Eventually, I was prescribed isotretinoin (Accutane). When carefully managed, it finally started to bring my skin under control. The breakouts gradually became less severe, and I began to see improvement. But then came another challenge—extreme dryness. It wasn't just uncomfortable; it was painful. My skin felt tight and fragile, and even moving my face could be difficult. Because of this, I had to reduce my dosage.

As soon as I did, my skin flared up again. It became a constant balancing act: increasing the dose enough to control the acne but not so much that the dryness became unbearable.

Over time, I learned to adjust the medication more precisely, making small changes and observing my skin's response. This approach eventually allowed me to maintain a stable condition. It wasn't a complete cure, but it was a livable balance. Even now, I continue to manage my skin carefully, keeping the lessons from that period in mind, especially the dangers of over-exfoliation and the importance of finding a sustainable routine.

From childhood rashes to severe, full-face inflammation, and finally to the slow stabilization with isotretinoin, my skin journey has been long, unpredictable, and at times overwhelming. But living through it taught me patience, persistence, and the need to listen to my skin truly. Stability may not sound glamorous, but after everything, it feels like the most significant victory I could ask for.

4. You're Not Alone

One of the most isolating parts of having a visible skin condition is feeling that no one else could understand. At times, it's as if the mirror shatters into sharp pieces and strikes straight into your heart. It can feel like people see not just your skin, but the shards inside you, leaving you broken both inside and out. These "pieces" may be imaginary, but the pain feels real.

I once thought I was the only one carrying this heaviness. But the more I shared, the more I met others with similar stories: acne, eczema, psoriasis, or unexplained rashes. Many had avoided mirrors, skipped events, or felt their confidence collapse over something they couldn't fully control. Knowing others felt the same made me feel less alone and less "abnormal."

Skin struggles are more common than they appear. People hide them with makeup, clothes, filters, or silence, but countless others are fighting the same quiet battles. And most importantly, never compare yourself to the person next to you. If you're reading this book, you already know I've been through a lot, and I'm still here, still moving forward. Your journey is your own, and it's worth more than any comparison.

5. Keep Going

There will be days when your skin feels like it's finally healing, and days when it seems like everything has fallen apart again. You'll have mornings when you look in the mirror and see progress, and nights when you feel like you've gone backwards. This is so normal. Healing is rarely a straight, smooth path; it's a winding road with ups, downs, and unexpected turns.

What matters most is that you keep going. Even when the improvement is slow, even when you feel tired of trying, your small actions still matter. Drinking water, sleeping an extra hour, resisting the urge to pick, these might feel insignificant in the moment, but they build on each other over time.

There were times in my journey when I wanted to stop caring altogether, when I thought nothing I did was making a difference. But looking back, the fact that I kept going, kept showing up for my skin in small, consistent ways, is the reason I'm in a better place now.

You and your skin don't have to be perfect. You just have to keep moving forward, even if it's one slow step at a time. Your skin, your mind, and your future self will thank you for it, honestly.

THE END

(You can do it!)